Winter. Baothe's Baby. 1891

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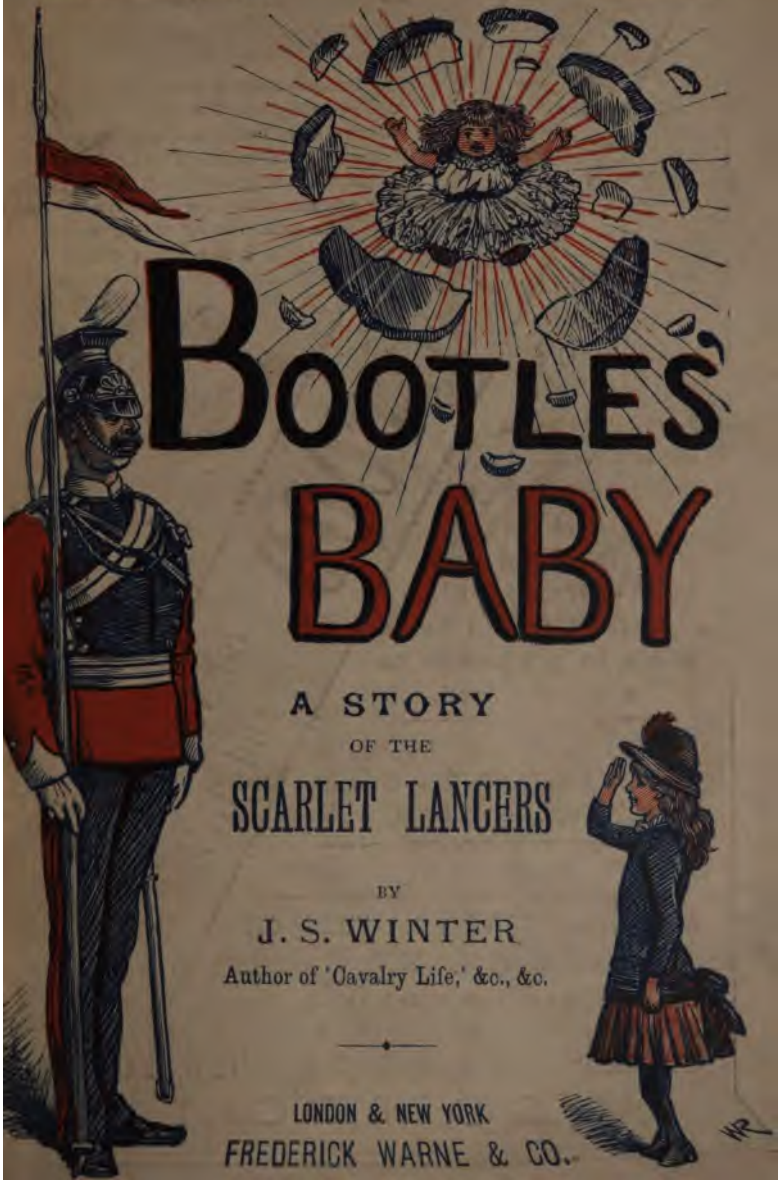

BOOTLES' BABY

A STORY

OF THE

SCARLET LANCERS

BY

J. S. WINTER

Author of 'Cavalry Life,' &c., &c.

LONDON & NEW YORK

FREDERICK WARNE & CO.

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FRONTISPIECE.

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BOOTLES' BABY.

CHAPTER I.

CHUCKACHUCKACHUCK.

WAS considerably after midnight when one of three officers, seated at a whist-table in the mess-room of the Cavalry Barracks at Idleminster, where the Scarlet Lancers were quartered, called out, "Bootles, come and take a hand, there's a good chap."

Captain Algernon Ferrers, more commonly known as "Bootles," looked up.

"I don't mind if I do," he said, rising and moving toward them. "What do you want me to do? Who's my partner?"

The three other men stared at one another in surprise, for Bootles was one of the best whist players in the regiment, and, in an ordinary way, would as soon have thought of counting honours as of settling the question of partners other than by cutting, except in the case of a revenge.

"Why, take a card, of course, my fwriend," laughed Lucy, in a ridiculously soft voice. Lucy was a recent importation from the White Dragoons, and had taken possession of the place left vacant in Bootles' every-day life by Scott Laurie's marriage.

"Ah! yes; to be sure—cut, of course. I believe," said Bootles, looking at the three faces before him in an uncertain way; "I believe I've got a headache."

"Oh! nothing like whist for a headache," answered Hartog, turning up the last card.

"Ace of diamonds."

However, after stumbling through one game—after twice trumping his partner's trick, a revoke, and several such-like blunders—he rose to his feet.

"It's no use, you fellows—I'm no good to-night—I can't even see the cards. Get some one to take my place, and make a fresh start."

"Why, you're ill, Bootles," cried Preston. "What is it?"

"It's a devil of a headache," answered Bootles promptly. "Here's Miles—the very man. Good night."

"Good night," called the fellows after him. Then they settled down to their game, and Preston dealt.

"Never saw Bootles seedy before," said Lucy.

"Oh, yes! he gets these headaches sometimes," answered Hartog. "Not often, though. Miles, your lead."

Meantime Bootles went wearily away, almost feeling his road under the veranda of the mess-rooms, along the broad *pavé* in front of the officers' quarters, and up the wide flight of stone steps to his rooms facing the green of the barrack square. Being the senior captain, with only one bachelor field-officer in the regiment, he had two large and pleasant rooms, not very grandly furnished, for, though a rich man, he was not an extravagant one, and saw no fun in having costly goods and chattels to be at the tender mercies of soldier servants; but they were neat, clean, and comfortable, with a sufficiency of great easy travelling chairs, plenty of fur rugs, and lots of pretty little pictures and knick-knacks.

The fire in his sitting-room was fast dying out, but a bright and cheerful blaze illumined his sleeping-room, shining on the brass knobs of his cot, on the silver ornamentations at the corners of his

dressing-case, on the three or four scent-bottles on the tall cretonne-petticoated toilette-table, and on the tired but resplendent figure of Bootles himself.

He dragged the big chair pretty near to the fire, and dropped into it with a sigh of relief, absolutely too sick and weary to think about getting into bed just then. As Hartog had said, sometimes these headaches seized him, but it did not happen often —in fact, he had not had one for more than a year —quite often enough, he said.

Well, he had been lying in the big and easy chair, his eyes shut and his hands hanging idly over the broad straps which served for arms, for perhaps half-an-hour, when to his surprise he heard a soft rustling movement behind him. His first, and not unnatural thought, was that the fellows had come to draw him, so, without moving, he called out, "Oh! confound it all, don't come boring a poor devil with a headache. By Jove, it's cruelty to animals, neither more nor less."

The soft rustling ceased, and Bootles closed his eyes again, with a devout prayer that they would, in response to this appeal, take themselves off. But presently it began again, accompanied by a sound which made his heart jump almost into his mouth, and beat so furiously as to be simply suffocating. It stopped — was repeated — "*The*—— DEVIL!" muttered Bootles.

But it was not the Devil at all—more like a

little angel, in truth—for, after a moment's irresolution, he sprang from his chair and faced the horror behind him. It really was a horror to him, for there, sitting up among the pillows of the cot, with the clothes pushed back, was a baby—a baby whose short golden curls shone in the firelight—a little child dressed in white, with a pair of wide open, wondering eyes, as bright as stars and as blue as sapphires.

Bootles stood in dismay staring at it.

"Where, in the name of all that's wonderful, did *you* come from?" he asked aloud, keeping at a safe distance lest it should suddenly start howling.

But the little stranger did not howl, on the contrary, as its bewildered eyes fell upon Bootles' resplendent figure, his gold-laced scarlet jacket and gold embroidered waistcoat of white velvet, his gold-laced overalls and jingling spurs, it stretched out its little arms, and cried, "Boo, boo boo——!"

Bootles took a step back in his suprise, and his headache vanished, as if by magic.

"By—Jove!" he exclaimed.

"Boo—boo—boo!" crowed the usurper of the cot, cheerily.

Bootles went a step nearer. "Why, you're a queer little beggar," he remarked. "Where did you come from, eh?"

The "queer little beggar" suddenly changed its

tone, and started another system of crowing more triumphant and cheery than the first.

"Chucka—chucka—chucka—chuck!" it went. Bootles began to laugh. "Can't talk—hey? Well, what do you want?" as it struggled fiercely to rise, and stretched out its small arms more impatiently than before. "Want to be lifted up, hey? Oh, but dash it," scratching his head perplexedly, "*I* can't lift you up, you know—it's out of the question—impossible. By Jove, I might let you drop and smash you."

"Chucka—chucka—chucka! Boo—oo—oo!" gobbled the baby, as if it was the best joke in the world."

Bootles positively roared.

"You don't mind? Well, come along, then," approaching very gingerly, and wondering where he should begin to get hold of it, so to speak.

The baby soon settled that question, holding out its arms towards his neck. Then somehow he gathered it up, and carried it in doubt and trepidation to the big chair by the fire, where the creature sat contentedly upon his knee, the curly golden head resting against his scarlet jacket, the soft fingers of one baby hand tight twined round one of his, the other picking and wandering aimlessly about the scrolls and curves of the gold embroidery on his waistcoat.

"By Jove, you're a jolly little chap!" said

Bootles, just as if it could understand him. "But the question is, where did you come from, and what's to be done with you? You can't stop here, you know."

The babe's big blue eyes raised themselves to his, and the fingers which had been twined round his made a grab at his watch chain.

"Gar—gar—garr—rah!" it remarked, in such evident delight that Bootles laughed again.

"Oh! You like it, do you? Well, you're a queer little beggar—no mistake about that. I wonder who you belong to, and where you live when you are at home? Can't be a barrack child —too dainty-looking, and not slobbery enough. And this dress," taking hold of the richly-embroidered white skirt, "this must have cost a lot, and it's all lace too."

He knew what embroidery cost by his own mess-waistcoats and his tunics. Then, not only was the dress of the child of a very costly description, but its sleeves were tied up with Cambridge blue ribbons that were evidently new, and its waist was encircled by a broad sash of the same material and tint. Altogether, it was just such a child as he was occasionally called upon to admire in the houses of his married brother officers—yet that any lady in the regiment would lend her baby for a whole night to a set of harum-scarum young fellows for the purpose of playing a trick on a brother officer was

manifestly absurd. And, besides that, Bootles was so good-natured, and such a favourite with the ladies of the regiment, that he thought he knew all their babies by sight, and he became afraid that this one was indeed a little stranger in the land, welcome or unwelcome.

Yet, if it was the fellows' doing, where had they got it? And if it was not the fellows' doing, why should any one leave a baby asleep in his cot? The whole thing was inexplicable.

Just then the child, in playing with his chain, slipped a little on the smooth cloth of his overalls, and Bootles, with a "Whoa—whoa, my lad!" hauled it up again. In doing so he felt a piece of paper rustle somewhere about the embroidered skirt.

"A note! This grows melodramatic," said Bootles, craning his head to find it. "Oh! here we are. Now we shall see."

The note was written in a firm, large, yet thoroughly feminine hand, and ran thus:

"You will not absolve me from my oath of secrecy respecting our marriage, though now that I have offended you, I may starve or go to the workhouse. I cannot break my oath, though you have broken *all* yours, but I am determined that you *shall* acknowledge your child. I am going to leave her to-night in your rooms with her clothes. By mid-

night I shall be out of the country. I do this because I have obtained a good situation, and because when I reach my destination I shall have spent my last shilling. I give you fair warning, however, that if you desert the child, or fail to acknowledge her, I will break my oath and proclaim our marriage. If you engage a nurse she will not be much trouble. She is a good and sweet-tempered child, and I have called her Mary, after your dear mother. Oh! how she would pity me if she could see me now. Farewell."

From that moment Bootles absolved "the fellows" from any share in the affair; but what to do with the child he had not the least idea.

"It is the very Devil," he said aloud, watching the busy fingers still playing with his chain.

He gathered it awkwardly in his arms, and rose to look for the clothing spoken of in the letter. Yes, there it was, a parcel of goodly size, wrapped in a stout brown paper cover, and on the chair beside his cot lay the outdoor garments of a young child—a white coat bordered with fur—a fur-trimmed cap, and some other things, which Bootles did not quite understand the use of—white wool fingerless gloves—at least he did not know what else they could be—and some longer things of the same class, like stockings without feet.

Bootles shook his head in bewilderment.

"Mother means it to stop—*I* don't know what to do," he said, helplessly.

It occurred to him then that, perhaps, some of the fellows might be able to make a suggestion. He did not know what to do with the child for the night, nor, for the matter of that, what to do with it for the moment. He had the sense not to take it out into the chill midnight air, and when he attempted to put it back into the cot it rebelled clinging to his watch-chain with might and main.

"Well, have it then," he said, slipping it off.

The baby, pleased with the glittering toy, set up a cry of delight, and Bootles took the opportunity of slipping out. He entered the ante-room with a very rueful face, finding it pretty much as he had left it. Lucy was the first to catch sight of him.

"Hollo, Bootles! What's the mat-tah?" he asked. "Is your head worse?"

"My head? Oh, I forgot all about it," Bootles replied. "But I say, I'm in a mess. There's a baby in my room."

"A WHAT?" they cried with one voice.

"A baby!" repeated Bootles, dismally.

"Al—ive?" asked Lucy, with his head on one side.

"Alive! Oh, very, very much so, and means to stop, for it has brought its entire wardrobe and a letter of introduction with it," holding the letter for

any one to take who chose. It was Lucy who did so, and he asked if he should read it out?

"Yes, do," said Bootles, dropping into a chair, with a groan. "Perhaps some one else will own to it."

So Lucy read the letter in his ridiculous drawl of a voice, and ceased amid profound silence—"Fa-ah-well!"

"Well?" said Bootles, finding no one seemed inclined to speak. "Well?"

"Well," said Preston, solemnly, "if you want *my* opinion, Bootles, I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

A general laugh followed, but Bootles protested.

"Oh! don't imagine it's me. I've nothing to do with it. I shouldn't have come to you fellows if I had."

"No, no. Of course not!" returned Miles, promptly, but with an air which raised another shout.

"Then it's a plant," announced Preston, in a tone of conviction.

"Of course it's a plant," cried Bootles; "but why in the wide world should it be planted on me?"

"Why, indeed?" echoed Miles, feelingly.

"Besides," Bootles continued, "some of you know my mother, and that her name was not Mary but Margaret."

Now as several of those present had known

Lady Margaret Ferrers very well, that was a strong point in favour of Preston's assertion that the affair was a plant. The chief question, however, was what could be done with the little stranger for that night. Some woman, of course, must look after it, but who? It was then after two o'clock, and the lights had been out hours ago in the married people's quarters. Bootles did not know what to do, and said so

"Is it in your room now?" Preston asked.

"Yes."

"Where did you find it?"

"In my cot."

"The devil you did. I wonder you weren't frightened out of your very wits."

"I nearly was," Bootles admitted.

"Did you see it at once? Was it howling?"

"Howling? Not a bit of it. Never saw a jollier little beggar in all my life."

"Oh," ejaculated Miles, blankly. "I say, you fellows, don't that sound to you very much like the proud Pap—ah?"

"You fellows" all laughed at this, even perplexed Bootles, and Hartog asked a question.

"Did you see it directly, Bootles?"

"Oh, no. Not for half-an-hour or more."

"What on earth did you do?"

"Why, I looked at it, of course. What would you have done?"

"Did you *touch* it?"

Bootles laughed. "Yes, by Jove, the little beggar came to me like a bird."

"Great gods!" uttered Miles, "and you can doubt the fatherliness of *that*."

"Oh, what an ass you are," returned Hartog, then, as if by a bright inspiration, suggested, "I say, let's go and have a look at it."

Thereupon the assembled officers, five of them, trooped along the way Bootles had stumbled over alone in the blindness of his now forgotten headache. The baby was still in the cot, contentedly playing with the watch and chain, and at the sight of the five resplendent figures it set up a loud "Boo—boo—boo—ing," following by a "Chucka—chucka—chucka—ing," evidently it considered this was the Land of Goshen.

"Seems to take after its mother in its love for a scarlet jacket," remarked Miles, sententiously. "I've heard that the child is father of the man—seems of the woman, too."

"Bootles," said Lucy, gravely, "isn't it very pwretty?"

"Yes, poor little beggar."

"Let's see you nurse it," cried Hartog.

So Bootles, proud of this new accomplishment, lifted the child awkwardly in his arms, pretty much as he might have done if it had been a sackful of eggs, and he had made a wager he

wouldn't break one of them. He carried it to the fire.

"Just light the candles, one of you," he said.

"It's the image of Bootles," persisted Miles.

"Well, it isn't mine, except by deed of gift," returned Bootles with a laugh.

"Bootles," said Lucy, "look back over your past life——" Here he made a pause.

"Well?" said Bootles expectantly.

"Twry to think if you can twrace any likeness to some early love, who may have marwried—or for that matter, *not* have marwried—some one else and —er—wremembering your kind heart—for you have a dashed kind heart, Bootles, there's no denying it—may have found herself hard up or too much encumbered—for—er—you know, a babay is sometimes an awkward addition to a lady's belongings—and may have twrusted to your—er —general—well, shall we say softness of chawracter to see it well pwrovided for—er—see?"

"No, I don't. Of course, I see you what you mean, but I can't——"

"Well—er—" Lucy broke in, "I—er—pewrhaps was not thinking so much of *your* case as of my own. You see," appealing to the other three, "the advent of this—er—babay cwreates a pwrecedent, and—er—if it should chance to occur to *my* first love—it would be awkward—for me, very awkward. Her name," plunging headlong into a story they

all knew, "was Naomi, and—er—she—er—in fact, jilted me for an elephantine parson, whose wreverwend name was—er—Fligg, Solomon Fligg. Now, if Mrs.—er—Solomon Fligg was to take it into her head to pack up the—er—eleven little Fliggs and send 'em to me—it would be what I should call awkward—devilish awkward." Lucy's four hearers positively roared, and the baby on Bootles' knee chuckled and crowed with delight.

"I believe it understands," Preston laughed.

"No. But it seems a jolly little chap," answered Bootles. "Oh, I forgot, 'tis a girl. I say, I do wish you fellows would advise me what to do. How can I get one to attend to it?"

"Oh, roll it up in the bed-clothes and sleep on the sofa. It will go to sleep when it's tired," said one.

"With its clothes on?" said Bootles, doubtfully. "I rather fancy they undress babies when they put 'em to bed."

"I don't advise you to try. Oh, it won't hurt for to-night."

"There's a cab just driven up. I believe it's the Grays. I saw them go out dressed before dinner," said Hartog. The Grays were the Adjutant and his wife, who lived in barracks. "She would help you in a minute."

"Oh; go and see, there's a good chap," Bootles cried eagerly.

Hartog therefore went out. He found that it was the Adjutant with his wife returning from a party, and to the lady he addressed himself. "Oh, Mrs. Gray, Bootles is in such trouble," he began.

"WELL, HE'S GOT A BABY."

"In trouble? Bootles? Captain Ferrers?" she said. "What is the matter?"

"Well, he's got a baby," Hartog answered.

"Got WHAT?" Mrs. Gray cried.

"A baby. It's been left in his rooms, clothes and all, and Bootles don't know what the de——, what in the world, I mean, to do with it."

"Shall I go in and see it?" Mrs. Gray asked.

"I wish you would. Some of the others are there."

Well, eventually Mrs. Gray carried off the little stranger to her own quarters, and put it to bed. As for Bootles, he too went to bed, but during the whole of that blessed night he never slept a wink.

CHAPTER II.

HIS WORD OF HONOUR.

WHEN Bootles showed his face in the mess-room the following morning he was greeted by such a volley of chaff as would have driven a more nervous man, or one less of a favourite than himself, to despair. Already the story had gone the round of the barracks, and Bootles found the greater part of his brother officers ready and willing to take Miles's view of the affair, whether in chaff or downright good earnest he could not say.

"Hollo, Bootles, my man," shouted one when he entered. "What's this story we hear? Is it possible that Bootles—our immaculate and philanthropical Bootles—oh, Bootles, Bootles, how are the mighty fallen!"

"Hey?" inquired Bootles sweetly.

"I wouldn't have believed it of you, Bootles, I wouldn't indeed. Any other fellow in the regiment—that soft-headed Lucy grinning over there, for instance—but *our Bootles*——" He broke off as if words could not express the volumes he thought,

but found his tongue, and went on again before Bootles could open his mouth. "Our Bootles with an unacknowledged wife, sworn not to disclose her marriage—our Bootles with a baby—our Bootles a Papa! Oh lor!"

"Why didn't you manage better, Bootles?" cried another. "You might have sent her an odd fiver now and then. You have plenty."

"Is she pretty, Bootles?" asked a third.

"Was there by any chance a flaw in the marriage?" inquired a fourth.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" asked Bootles, pleasantly. "I tell you it's a plant. I know nothing about the creature."

"Just my view," struck in Miles. "Just what I said last night. It's absurd, you know, to expect him to own it. No fellow would. Besides, does Bootles look like the father of a fine bouncing baby that goes 'Chucka, chucka, chuck!' It's absurd, you know."

Even Bootles joined in the laugh which followed, and Miles continued:—

"The only thing is—and it really is awkward for Bootles—the extraordinary likeness. Blue eyes, golden hair, fair complexion. I should say myself," looking at his comrade critically, "that at the same age Bootles was just such a baby as that which turned up so mysteriously last night."

"That's as may be. Anyway, the youngster is

not mine," said Bootles, emphatically. "And what to do with the little beggar *I* don't know."

"Send it back to its mother," suggested Dawson.

"But I don't know who the mother is," Bootles answered impatiently.

"Oh, no; so you say. Well, then, the brat must have growed, like Topsy. If I were you, I should send it to the police-station."

"The police-station? Oh, no; hang it all, the poor little beggar has done nothing to start the world in that way," Bootles answered.

"Did any of you," asked Miles, of the general company, "ever hear of a chap called Solomon?"

"I—er—did," answered Lucy, promptly. "His other name was—er—Fligg. The Wrevewrend Solomon Fligg."

"Oh, we've all heard of *him!* but I meant a rather more celebrated person. There is a story about him—I rather think it's in Proverbs," eliciting a yell of laughter. "Not Proverbs? Well, perhaps it's in the Song of Solomon. It's about two mothers, who each had a baby, and one of them managed to smother hers in the night, and, finding it dead when she woke up in the morning, claimed the other baby. Of course the other woman kicked up a row, a regular shindy, and they came before Solomon to get the matter settled.

"'Both claim it?' said he. 'Then chop it in half, and let each have a share——'"

"I TELL YOU IT IS A PLANT."

"But you all know the rest. How the real mother gave up her claim sooner than see the child halved. Now in this case, you see, Bootles hasn't the heart to send the child off to the police-station, as he would if——"

"Here's the Colonel," said some one at this point, and in less than two seconds he appeared.

"Why, Ferrers," he said, "I've been hearing a queer tale about you."

"Yes, sir," said Bootles, dismally; "and where it will end *I* don't know! Here am I saddled ——"

"Well, of course you know whether the child has any claim upon you," the Colonel began.

"Upon my honour it has not, Colonel," said Bootles, earnestly.

"Then that, of course, settles the question," replied the Colonel, with a frown at the grinning faces along the table. "I should send the child to the workhouse immediately."

"The workhouse!" repeated Bootles, reflectively.

"I'll bet anyone a fiver he don't," murmured Miles to his neighbours.

"Not he. Madame la Mére knew what she was doing when she picked out Bootles. He'll get one of the sergeants' wives to look after it; see if he don't."

After the chief had left the room, Bootles con-

tinued his breakfast in silence, considering the two suggestions for the disposal of the child. Now, if the truth be told, Bootles had a horror of workhouses. He had gone deeply into the "Casual" question, and pitied a tramp from the very inmost recesses of his kind heart. It fairly made him sick to think of that bonny golden head growing up among the shorn and unlovely locks of a pauper brood—to think of the little soft fingers that had twined themselves so confidently about his own, and had picked at the embroideries of his mess-waistcoat, being slapped by the matron, or set as soon as they should be strong enough to do coarse and hard work, to develop into the unnaturally widened and unkempt hand of a "Marchioness"—to think of that little dainty thing being nourished on skilly, or on whatever hard fare pauper children are fed—to think of that little aristocrat being brought up among the children of thieves and vagabonds!

"Oh, confound it all!" he broke out. "I *can't*."

"I never expected you could," retorted Miles. "It wouldn't be natural if you did."

This time Bootles did not laugh, on the contrary, he looked up and regarded Miles with a grave and searching gaze, rather disconcerting to that quizzical young gentleman.

"Are you judging me out of your own bushel?" he asked.

"How? What do you mean?" Miles stammered.

"Do *you* happen to know anything of the matter?" Bootles persisted.

"I? Oh, no. On my honour, I don't."

"Ah! As the Colonel said just now, that settles the question. You're a very witty fellow, Miles, very. I shouldn't wonder, after a while, if you ain't quite the sharp man of the regiment. Only your jokes are like the clown's jokes at the circus—one gets to know them. And when you've been to the circus half-a-dozen times somehow you don't see anything to laugh at."

For grace's sake Miles was obliged to laugh, for every one else roared, except Bootles, who went on speaking very gravely:—

"I know it's very amusing to make a joke of the affair, to say I know more about it than I will confess. I have told the Colonel *on my honour* that the child is not mine. Nor do I know whose it is. If it were mine I should not have made the story public property—it's not in reason that I should. My difficulty is what to do with it. The Colonel suggests the workhouse, Dawson the police-station—one simply means the other, and I can't bring myself to do it. It is an awful thing for the child of a tramp or a thief to be reared in a workhouse—and this is no common person's child. For anything I know it may belong to one of you."

"That's true enough," observed a man who had not yet taken part in the discussion, except to laugh now and then. "But remember, Bootles, if you saddle yourself with the child you will have to go on with it. It will stick to you like a burr, and though *we* are all ready to accept your word of honour, the world may not be so. If you put the brat out to nurse in the regiment the story may crop up years hence, just when you least desire or expect it, and, you know a story—mixed and confused by time and repetition—about a deserted wife, may come to have a very ugly sound about it. Now if, as the Colonel suggests, you send the child to the workhouse, you wash your hands of the whole business. Then again, if the brat is brought up in the regiment, with the *disadvantage* of your protection, what will she be in twenty years' time? Neither fish, fowl, nor good red herring. Far better the oblivion of pauperism than the distinction among the men of being Captain Ferrers'—shall we say *protégée*."

"Yes. There's a great deal in that," Bootles admitted. He had at all times a great respect for Harkness, and profound faith in the soundness of his judgment. He saw at once that any plan of bringing the child up among the married people of the regiment would not do, and yet—*the workhouse*.

He rose from the table and settled his forage-cap upon his head. "I daresay you fellows will laugh

at me," he said, almost desperately, as he pulled the chin strap over his moustache, "but I can't condemn that helpless thing to the workhouse—I *can't*, and that's all about it. It seems to me," he went on, rubbing the end of his whip on the back of a chair, and looking at no one, "it seems to me that the child's future in this world and the next depends upon the course I take now. And you may laugh at me—I daresay you will," he said, quite nervously for him, "but I shall get a proper nurse to take charge of it, and I shall keep it myself—until some one turns up to claim it—or —or for good."

Just then the officers' call sounded, and Bootles made a clean bolt of it, leaving his brother-officers staring amazedly at one another. The first of them to make a move was Lucy, the first, too, to speak.

"Upon my soul," said he, "Bootles is a devilish fine fellow, and d——it all," he added, getting very red, and scarcely drawling, in his intense rage of admiration, "if there were a few more fellows in the world like him, it would be a vewry diffewrent place to what it is."

CHAPTER III.

"I CAN'T DO IT."

AS soon as Bootles had a spare moment he made his way to the Adjutant's quarters, where he found Mrs. Gray playing with the mysterious baby.

"Oh, is that you, Captain Ferrers?" she exclaimed. "Come and see your waif. She is the dearest little thing. Why, I do believe she knows you."

Bootles whistled to the child, which promptly made a grab at his chain, and when he sat down on the sofa on which it was sprawling, tried very hard to get at the gold badge on his collar. Shoulder badges had not then come in.

"Mrs. Gray," Bootles said, "she's very well dressed, is she not?"

"Oh! very," Mrs. Gray answered, smoothing out the child's skirt, so as to display the fine and deep embroidery. "Unusually so. All its clothes are of the finest and most expensive description."

"I thought so; it don't look like a common child, eh?"

"Not at all," replied the lady, promptly.

"Well," Bootles told her, "I've been most unmercifully chaffed, which was only to be expected; but the Colonel takes my word about it, and, of course, the others don't matter. I can't think, though, why the mother has chosen me."

"Ah! well, you see, Captain Ferrers," said the Adjutant's wife, with a smile, "it is rather inconvenient sometimes to have a character for great kindness of heart. I should say you are the greatest favourite in the regiment, and naturally enough, the officers speak of it sometimes in society. 'Oh, Bootles is this and Bootles is that,' 'Bootles wouldn't turn a dog from his door,' 'Bootles would share his last sixpence with a poor chap who was down,' and so on. *I* have heard, Captain Ferrers, of your emptying your pockets to divide among three poor tramps who had begged no more than a pipe of tobacco. *I* have heard of your standing up for," with a deeper smile, "the poor devils of casuals; and if I hear it, why not others—why not the mother of this child?"

"True. But I think you all overrate my character," Bootles replied, modestly. "You know, I don't go in for being saintly at all."

"That is just it. If you did, you would have no more influence than Major Allardyce, whom everyone laughs at. But you don't; you are one of themselves, and yet you will always help a man

who is down; you will do any unfortunate creature a good turn. Oh! I hear a good deal, though you choose to make light of it. And you know, Captain Ferrers, we are not told that the good Samaritan made a great spluttering about what he did; but

the professional saints, the Priest and the Levite, passed by on the other side."

"You are very complimentary," Bootles said, blushing a little; "much more than I deserve, I'm sure. The fellows," laughing at the remembrance, "were much less merciful. Then about the child. Dawson suggests sending it to the police-station—the Colonel to the workhouse; and one means the other, of course."

Mrs. Gray caught the child to her breast, with a cry of dismay, and Bootles went on.

"Yes, I feel as you do about it. I *can't* do it, and that's all about it. It would be on my conscience all my life. Besides, some day the mother might come back for it, and though, of course, as the Colonel says, there is no claim upon me, yet, if for the sake of a few pounds I had turned the poor little beggar adrift, ruined its life—why, I simply couldn't face her, and that's all about it. And besides that, Mrs. Gray, I have a lurking suspicion that the letter is genuine, and that it was not written to or intended for me. It reads to me like the letter of a woman who was desperate."

"Yes; a woman must have been desperate indeed willingly to part with such a child as that," said Mrs. Gray, smoothing the gold baby-curls.

"So I think; for nature is nature all the world over," Bootles answered. "And besides, to tell you the honest truth, there is a resemblance in the child to some one I knew once——"

"Yes?" eagerly.

"Oh, no! not that. She is dead. She was engaged to a fellow I knew, desperately fond of him, and he—jilted her."

"Mr. Kerr?"

Bootles stared. "Who told you?"

"He told me himself, I think, to ease his mind," she answered quietly.

"Ah! Well, it killed her. She died heart-broken. I saw her," he said, rising and going to the window, whence he stood staring out over the square, "a few hours after she died. That child's mother may look like that now, and I can't and won't turn it adrift whatever the fellows or anyone else choose to think or say; and that's all about it."

Two bright tears gathered in Mrs. Gray's eyes, and falling, fell upon the baby's curls of gold—two priceless diamonds from the unfathomable and exhaustless mines of pity. For a moment or two there was silence, broken at last by the child's laugh, as a ray of sickly winter sunshine fell upon the glittering chain in its little hands. The sound recovered Bootles, who turned from the window.

"And so, Mrs. Gray," he said, carefully avoiding the gaze of her wet eyes, "I have determined to keep the little beggar; but Harkness, who's no fool, you know, has convinced me that it won't do to trust to any of the barrack-women to look after her. Therefore, if you won't mind undertaking it for a few days, I will advertise for a respectable elderly nurse to take entire charge of the creature. I daresay I can arrange with Smithers for an extra room, and you'll let me come to you for advice now and then, won't you?"

Mrs. Gray rose, and went close to him, laying

her hand upon his arm. "Captain Ferrers," she said, earnestly, "you will have your reward. God will bless you for this."

"Oh, please don't, Mrs. Gray," Bootles stammered. "Really, I'd rather you'd chaff me."

Mrs. Gray laughed outright. "Well, you know what my sentiments are, so, for the future, I will chaff you unmercifully. Come in," she added, in a louder tone, as a "tap-tap" sounded on the door.

The permission was followed by the entrance of Lucy, who came in with a pleasant "Good—er—morning," and a soft laugh at the sight of the baby on the sofa.

"I—er—thought old Bootles would be here," he explained. "And besides—I—er—wanted to see the babay. Seems to me, Bootles," he added, staring with an absurd air of reflective wisdom at the infant, "as if the face is somehow familiar to me. Oh, I don't mean you—it ain't a bit like you; but there is a likeness, though I don't know where to plant it!"

"Perhaps it will grow," suggested Bootles.

"Ah! pewrhaps it will, and pewrhaps it won't. The worst of the affair is, that it is cwreating a pwrecedent"—not for worlds would he have admitted to his friend that he thought him the fine fellow he had declared him in the mess-room that morning—"and if we are *all* inundated with

babays, I wreally don't know" (plaintively) "wh
the wregiment will come to."

"Gar—ah—gar—ah!" chuckled the subject

"OH, PLEASE DON'T, MRS. GREY."

this speech over the gold knob at the top of Lu
whip, "Cluck—cluck—cluck!"

"Little beggah seems to find it a good joke
way," Lucy cried. "I'm a gwreat hand at nurs

Our adjutant's wife in the White Dwragoons had twree—*all* at once. I say, Mrs. Gwray, stick it something on, and I'll take it out and show it around."

"Dare you?" she asked.

"Dawre I? Just twry. By-the-by, it's cold this morning—vewry cold."

Mrs. Gray therefore fetched the child's white coat and cap, and those other white woollen articles, which Bootles now discovered to be leggings, and quickly transformed the little woman into a sort of snowball. The two men watched the operation with intense interest.

"La figlia del wreggimento," laughed Lucy. 'I declare, Bootles, she's quite a cwredit to us. I never saw such a 'petite mademoiselle.'"

Bootles started. It reminded him of the girl who had been jilted by his friend and died for love. He had always called her "Mademoiselle Mignon."

"Mademoiselle Mignon," he said, carelessly: "not a bad name for her."

"Vewry good," returned Lucy, preparing to present arms.

He proved himself a much better nurse than Bootles. He gathered the child on his left arm, and marched off to the anteroom, in front of which the officers were standing about waiting for lunch. They set up a shout at the sight of him, and crowded round to inspect the new importation.

Mademoiselle Mignon bore the inspection calmly, conscious perhaps—as she was such a knowing little person—of the effect of her big blue star-like eyes under the white fur of her cap.

"What a pity she ain't twenty years older," was the first comment, and it was said in such a tone of genuine regret that all the fellows laughed again. Miss Mignon gobbled with satisfaction.

"Seems a jolly little beggar," said another.

"Chut—chut—chut!" remarked Miss Mignon.

"Never saw such a jolly little beggar in all my life," asserted another voice.

"Pretty work she'll make in the regiment sixteen or seventeen years hence," grumbled old Garnet.

"Ah! well, nevah mind, Garnet—nevah you mind, Major Garnet, sir," cried Hartog, "we shall all be dead by then and—," but this being an exceedingly old and threadbare regimental joke was instantly snubbed in the face of the new and substantial one.

"Has it any teeth?" demanded Miles, the orderly officer for the day.

"Don't know. Open your mouth, little one," said Lucy, gravely.

At this point Miss Mignon made a delighted lunge in the direction of the belt across Miles' breast. Lucy shouted "Whoa, whoa," and Miles immediately backed out of reach. Miss Mignon's

mouth went dismally down, until Lucy remembered the knob of his whip, and held it up for her delectation.

"Boo—boo!" she crowed.

"By Jove! She can half say Bootles already," ejaculated Hartog. "And here he comes."

"Now then," Bootles called out. "Have any of you fellows made up your mind to own this little baggage?"

"No; none of us," they laughed; but one man, Gilchrist by name, said with a sneer he should rather think not, and added two unnecessary words—"*workhouse brat!*"

Bootles turned, and looked down upon him in profoundest contempt.

"My dear chap," he said, coolly, "to charge *you* with being the father of *that* child," pointing with his whip to the picture in Lucy's arms, "would be a compliment to your personal appearance which I should never, under any circumstances, have dreamt of paying you."

"I'll tell you what it is," said Hartog afterwards to Lucy, "Bootles is a dashed good fellow—one of the best fellows in the world. I don't know that there's another I'd trust as far or as thoroughly; but all the same, Bootles is sometimes best left alone, and, for my part, I think Gilchrist and every one else had best leave him alone about this youngster."

"Ya—as," returned Lucy; then began to laug "Oh! but it was fine though, about 'persor appearance.'" And then he added "Ugly litt beast."

CHAPTER IV.

"ARE YOU A 'SIR,' TOO."

IT was not to be expected, and Bootles did not expect it, that the story of the mysterious little stranger should be confined to barracks. In fact, in the course of a few hours it had flown all over the town, gaining additions and alterations by the frequency of its repetition, until at last Bootles himself could hardly recognise it. A baby had been found in Captain Ferrers' rooms, no one knew where it had come from, nor to whom it belonged. Then—Captain Ferrers had rescued a young baby from a brutal father who was going to dash its brains out against the door-post. Then—Captain Ferrers had picked up a new-born infant while hunting with the Duke's hounds. Then—Captain Ferrers was suffering from mental aberration, or, to speak plainly, was getting a bit cracked, and had adopted a child a year old out of Idleminster Workhouse. Then—it was really most romantic, but Captain Ferrers had been engaged to and jilted by a young lady long ago—(which, of course, ac-

counted for his being impervious to the fascinations of the Idleminster girls)—who had married, been deserted by her husband, and now died, some versions of the story said "committed suicide," leaving him the charge of a baby, &c.

Some people told one version of the story and some people told another, but nobody blamed Bootles very much. It might be because he was so rich and so handsome and pleasant—it might be because Idleminster society was free from that leaven of censoriousness which causes most people to look at most things from the worst possible point of view.

But Bootles went on his serene way, telling the true state of the case to every one who mentioned the affair to him, and always ending, "And hang it, you know, it's a pretty little beggar, and I *couldn't* send it to the workhouse."

He made no secret about it at all, and on the Saturday following the advent of the child an advertisement appeared in the *Idleminster Chronicle* which made Idleminster tongues clack for a week.

"Wanted immediately, a highly respectable and thoroughly experienced nurse of middle age, to take the entire charge of a child about a year old. Good wages to a suitable person.—Apply to Captain Ferrers, Scarlet Lancers."

In due time this advertisement produced the right sort of person, and a staid and respectable

widow of about fifty was soon installed in a room next to Mr. Gray's quarters, in charge of Miss Mignon, as the child had already come to be called by everybody.

It was a charming child—strong and healthy, seemed to have no trouble with temper or teeth, hardly ever cried, and might be seen morning and afternoon being wheeled by its nurse in a baby-carriage about the barrack square or along the road outside the Broad Arrow boundaries. And so, as the weeks rolled by, and wore into months, it began to toddle about, and could say "Bootles" as plain as a pike-staff.

In April the Scarlet Lancers were moved from Idleminster to Blankhampton, where Bootles had to undergo a new experience, for every one there took him for a widower on account of the child.

Bootles would explain. "Take her about with me? Yes, she likes it. Always wants to go when she sees the trap. A bother? Not a bit of it—the jolliest little woman in creation, and as good as gold. What am I going to do with her when she grows up? Well, Lucy *says* he is going to marry her. If he don't, somebody else will—no fear."

Taking it all round Miss Mignon had a remarkably good time of it, and seemed thoroughly to appreciate the pleasant places in which her lines had fallen. It was wonderful too what an immense favourite she was with "the fellows." At first she

had been "Bootles' brat," but very soon that was dropped, and by the time she could toddle, which she did in very good time, no one thought of mentioning her, or of speaking to her, except as "Miss Mignon." Scarcely any of the officers dreamt for a moment of returning after a few days' leave without "taking along," as the Americans say, a box of sweets or a bundle of toys for Miss Mignon. Indeed, the young lady came to have such a collection that after a while Mrs. Nurse's patient soul arose, and, with Captain Ferrers' permission, all the discarded ones were distributed among the less fortunate children of the regiment.

But Miss Mignon's favourite plaything was Bootles himself—after Bootles, Lucy. People said it was wonderful, the depth of the affection between the big soldier of thirty-five and the little dot of a child, scarcely two. Bootles she adored, and where Bootles was she would be, if by hook or by crook she could convey her small person into his presence. Once she spied him turn in at the gates on the right hand of the Colonel, when the regiment was returning from a field day, and escaping from her nurse's hand, set off as hard as she could run in the direction of the band which immediately preceded the commanding officer. Mrs. Nurse gave chase, but, alas! Mrs. Nurse was very stout, and had the ill-luck, moreover, to come a cropper over a drain-tile lying conveniently in her way,

A MOMENT OF DANGER.

while the child, unconscious of danger, ran straight for Bootles. Neither Bootles nor Lucy, who was on the Colonel's left, perceived her until she was close upon them, waving her small hands, and shouting in her shrill and joyous child's voice: "Bootles! Bootles!"

It seemed to Bootles, as he looked past the Colonel, that the child was almost under the hoofs of Lucy's charger. "Lucy!" he called out, "Lucy!" But Lucy was already on the ground, and caught Miss Mignon out of harm's way, but when he turned round he saw that his friend's face was as white as chalk.

As for the Colonel, when he saw Mrs. Nurse gathering herself up with rueful looks at the drain-tile, he simply roared, and Miss Mignon chimed in as if it was the finest joke in the world.

"That *was* a smash," she remarked, from her proud position on Lucy's shoulder, "just like Humpty Dumpty," a comment which gave that estimable person the name of Mrs. Humpty Dumpty as long as she remained with the regiment.

A few weeks after this the annual inspection came off, and Miss Mignon, resenting the lengthened absence of her Bootles, again managed to escape from her nurse, and pattered boldly, as fast as her small feet would carry her, right into the mess-room, where Bootles was sitting, just oppo-

site the General, at the late lunch. Miss Mignon not seeing him at first, wandered coolly behind the row of scarlet-clad backs, until she spied him at the other side of the table. Then, having no awe whatever of inspecting-officers, she wedged herself in between his chair and the Colonel's, with a triumphant and joyous laugh.

The General gave a great start, and the Colonel laughed—Bootles, in dismay, jumped up, and came quickly round the table to take her away.

"Well, you little rogue," said the Colonel, reaching a nectarine for her. "What do you want?"

"I wanted Bootles, sir," said Miss Mignon, confidentially. "And nurse falled asleep, so I tooked French leave." Almost the only peculiarity in her speech was the habit of making all verbs regular.

"And who are you, my little maid?" the General asked in extreme amusement.

"Oh! I'm Miss Mignon," with dignity.

The old General fairly chuckled with delight, and as he had put his arm round the child, Bootles, who was standing behind, could not very well take her away.

"Oh, Miss Mignon—hey? And who do you belong to?"

"Why to Bootles," in surprise at his ignorance.

"To Bootles? And who is Bootles?"

"Bootles is Bootles, and I love him," Miss Mignon replied, as if that settled everything.

"Happy Bootles," cried the old soldier.

"What a lot of medals you've got," cried Miss Mignon, pressing closer.

"I'm afraid, sir, she is troubling you," Bootles interposed at this point, but secretly delighted with the turn affairs had taken.

"No, no, let her see my medals," replied the General, who was as proud of his medals as Bootles of Miss Mignon.

"Are you a 'sir,' too?" Miss Mignon asked, gazing at the handsome old man with more respect.

"What *does* she mean?" he cried.

Bootles laughed. "Well, sir, she hears us speak to the Colonel so—that is all."

"Dear me! What a remarkably intelligent and attractive child," exclaimed the General. "How old is she?"

"About two, sir."

Now it happened that the old General had a craze for absolute accuracy, and he caught Bootles up with pleasant sharpness.

"Oh! Does that mean more or less?"

"I can't say, sir. She is about two. I do not know the date of her birth."

"Then she is not yours?"

"I am not her father, sir, but at present she belongs to me," Bootles said, smiling. "I'm afraid——"

"Not at all, but perhaps she had better go. What a charming child!" This last was perhaps because Miss Mignon, finding her time had come—and she never made a fuss on such occasions—put two soft arms round his neck, and gave him such a genuine hug of friendship that the old man's heart was quite taken by storm.

So Miss Mignon was carried off, looking back to the last over Bootles' shoulder, and waving her adieu to the handsome old man, who had such a fascinating array of clasps and medals.

"I didn't *quite* understand—*what* relation is the child to him?" he asked of the Colonel.

"None whatever. Ferrers found her late one night in his quarters with her wardrobe, and a letter from the mother, written as if Ferrers was the father. He, however, gave me his word of honour that he knew nothing about it, and some of us think the whole affair was simply a plant, as he is known to be a very kind-hearted fellow. Others, however, Ferrers amongst them, think that note and child were intended for one of the others. Nobody, however, would own to it, and Ferrers has kept the child ever since—I don't suppose he would part with her now for anything. I wanted him to send her to the workhouse, but 'tis a jolly bright little soul, and I am glad he did not."

"Then he is not married?"

"Oh dear no. He pays a woman fifty pounds a year to look after her, and all her meals go from the mess. In fact, he is bringing her up as if she were his own, and the child adores him—simply adores him."

"I respect that man," said the General warmly. "It is an awful thing for a child to be reared in a workhouse—awful."

"Yes. Bootles feels very strongly on the subject," replied the Colonel absently.

By the time Bootles returned, the officers had risen from the table, and he met the guests and the seniors just entering the ante-room.

"I'll shake hands with you, Captain Ferrers, if

you please," said the General cordially. "I agree with you that it is an awful thing for a child to be brought up in a workhouse. It is a subject upon which I feel very strongly—very strongly. A child reared as a pauper does not start the world with a fair chance. I have met so often in the course of my military experience with recruits bred in the unions—I never knew one do well. No, pauperism is ground into them, and they are never able to shake it off."

"Well, sir, that is my opinion," said Bootles modestly. "I hope, though, you won't think my little maid is often so obtrusive as to-day. She is really always very good."

"A charming little child," replied the General, as if he meant it, too, and then he shook hands with Bootles again.

CHAPTER V.

"I'M MISS MIGNON."

THERE was only one blot in the sweetness and light of Miss Mignon's baby character, so far as the officers of the Scarlet Lancers were concerned. Among them all there was only one whom she did not like. She had degrees of love—Bootles ranked first, then Lucy, then two or three groups of friends whom she liked best, better, and well; but she had no degrees of dislike. Where she did not love, she hated, hated fiercely and furiously, hated with all her baby heart and soul. There were several persons in her small world whom she detested thus, absolutely declining to hold communication or to accept overtures from them, however sweetly made, but there was only one of the officers who came under this head, and he was Gilchrist, the man who had dubbed her at first *workhouse brat.* Miss Mignon could not endure him. When old enough to understand that a certain box of sweeties had come from Mr. Gilchrist, she would drop it as if it had burnt her fingers, draw down the corners

of her mouth, and remark, "Miss Mignon is very much obliged," an observation which invariably sent Bootles and Lucy off into fits of laughter, at which the little maid would fly open-armed to him, and cry, "But Mignon *loves* Bootles." But the fact remained the same, that Miss Mignon detested Gilchrist, who, indeed, was not a favourite in the regiment. Nor, indeed, did Gilchrist seem to like Miss Mignon any better, though he now and then brought his offerings of toys and bon-bons like the rest. In the face of Bootles' severe snub about the two odious words he had applied to her, he was hardly such a simpleton as to further rouse or annoy the most popular man in the regiment; yet if he could possibly cast a slur on Bootles or on the child he did it. Never from his lips came the pet name, "Miss Mignon," never did his black eyes rest on her without a sneer or a jibe; if he could by any chance twist Bootles' words into an admission that the child was really his, he took care never to lose the opportunity.

"Oh, come now," Preston cried one day, when he had been sneering at Bootles and Lucy, who had just driven away with the child between them. "Bootles is a right good sort—no mistake on that point. No sneaking hypocrisy about him. It would be well for you and me if we were half as fine chaps, but we are not, Gilchrist, and, what is more, we never shall be."

"Oh no; but where is the mother of that brat?"

"How should I know? Or Bootles? I shouldn't mind laying my life that Bootles never did and never will cause her or any other woman to write such a letter as came with the child that night. Jolly good thing for this one if she was Bootles' wife, instead of being tied up to the hound who bound her to secrecy, and deserted her. Perhaps she's dead, poor soul! Who knows?"

"Perhaps she isn't," Gilchrist sneered. "Some people never die."

Good-natured and not very wise Preston stared at him, and Hartog looked from behind his newspaper, aghast at the bitterness of his tone.

"Good Heavens, Gilchrist!" Preston cried. "Are you *wanting* somebody to die?"

Gilchrist tried to laugh, and succeeded very badly. He rose from his chair, knocking a few scattered cigar ashes carefully off his braided cuff.

"Well, I confess I should not be sorry to see that prating brat of Bootles' out of the road. We should perhaps get at the truth then." And having delivered himself of this feeling speech he went out, banging the door after him.

"Well, upon my soul!" exclaimed Preston.

"Oh! the man's got a tile loose in his upper story," said Hartog, decidedly. "No man in his senses would talk such miserable rot as that.

Always thought Gilchrist a crazy fool myself, but I am sure of it now."

"And how he sticks to it Miss Mignon is Bootles' own child—as if it could be any good for him to say she isn't, if she is."

"No. I shall tell Bootles to keep an eye on Gilchrist. I say, what a comfort it would be if he would only exchange. I suppose we can't manage to dazzle him with the delights of India, eh?"

"Not very well. Besides, he lost ever so much seniority by coming to us."

"No such luck. It's queer, though, he should be so persistent about Bootles and Miss Mignon. I suppose he wants to daub Bootles with some of his own mud. Thinks if he only throws enough some of it's sure to stick, and so it would with most men. Happily, however, it don't in the least matter what a little cad like Gilchrist chooses to say about a man like Bootles—a jealous little beast."

Neither of them said any more about the matter, but Hartog took the earliest opportunity of repeating to Bootles what "that ass Gilchrist" had said about seeing that prating brat of Bootles' out of the road, and in consequence a kind of watch was set upon the child. Not that Bootles, though he had a very poor opinion of Gilchrist and Gilchrist's brains, was afraid for a moment that he would give

Miss Mignon poisoned bon-bons, or run off with her and drop her in the river; yet he did think it not improbable that he might encourage an already dangerous spirit of adventure, and of course be absolutely blameless if she could get trampled by a horse's cruel hoofs, or crushed by one of the many traps going in and out of barracks.

When Bootles had taken his first long leave after Miss Mignon's coming, he had left her at Idleminster in charge of her nurse, but when long leave came round again, and she must have been about two and a-half, he decided to take her with him. One reason for this was certainly a fear of any pranks Gilchrist might choose to play, another that Lucy was taking his leave at the same time, and Bootles was afraid, in the absence of both, Miss Mignon might fret herself into a fever. And, besides, he had missed the child during a fortnight's deer-stalking in Scotland that autumn more than he would have liked to own.

From Blankhampton, therefore, they went to his place, Ferrers Court, where he was to entertain a rather large party for Christmas, with a sister of his mother's, and his only near relative, to do the honours for him, and among his guests a Mrs. Smith, a widow, and sister to that dead girl to whom he fancied a resemblance in Miss Mignon. However, at the last moment Mrs. Smith wrote to excuse herself.

"I am very, very sorry," she said, "but a very dear friend of mine, with whom I spent two winters in Italy, has suddenly appeared, with a travelling companion and two maids to pay me a long-promised visit of at least two months. She is a Russian Countess—a widow, like myself, and wishes, I fancy, to improve her English, which she already speaks very well. Of course, I am dreadfully disappointed, but cannot help it."

Now it happened that Bootles had a very deep and great respect and liking for Mrs. Smith, and not for all the widowed countesses in Russia did he mean to see his plans upset, therefore he wrote off at once to Mrs. Smith, after a five minutes' consultation with Lady Marion, to beg her to carry out her original intentions, and bring Madame and her retinue along. Would she telegraph her reply?

Mrs. Smith did so—the reply being, Yes. Moreover, she supplemented the telegram by a letter, in which she mentioned, among other things, that Madame Gourbolski's travelling companion must be treated in all ways as an ordinary guest.

So, at the time originally appointed for Mrs. Smith's coming, the party of six—three ladies and three maids—arrived. Bootles himself went to the station to meet them. He found that Madame Gourbolski was young, not more than thirty, of the plump and fair Russian type, quite fair enough

to hold her own beside Mrs. Smith, whom he regarded as the most beautiful woman of his acquaintance. The third lady, Miss Grace, was fair also; perhaps not so positively beautiful as either the English or the Russian lady, but fair-haired, fair-skinned, with soft blue-grey eyes, intensely blue in some lights, as Bootles noticed directly. Graceful she was to a degree, and as he watched her move across the little station he thought how wonderfully her name suited her.

Mrs. Smith smiled at him as he helped her to mount to the top of the omnibus. "Is not the likeness wonderful?" she said, with one of those quick sighs with which we speak of our dead; and then she said, "Poor Rosey."

Bootles turned and looked at Miss Grace again, his mind going back to those dark days, past and gone now, when he and his best friend had been estranged for honour's sake—when he and this imperially beautiful woman had stood side by side, watching a young life die out, had together seen the sacrifice of a heart, the martyr of love to man.

"Yes; it is very great," he said, briefly.

That dead sister of Mrs. Smith's had always been and would always be a not-to-be-broken bond of union between them, for the widow knew how gladly "that grand Bootles," as she always called him, would have tried to make up for the love she had lost, while to Bootles Mrs. Smith stood out

from the rest of womenkind as the sister of the only woman he ever wished or asked to marry him.

He helped Miss Grace up to the seat beside Mrs. Smith, and took his own place beside the Russian lady, who entertained him very well during the three miles' drive between Eagles Station and Ferrers' Court.

"Oh! but what a paradise!" she cried, as the carriage turned into the courtyard.

"I am delighted that it pleases you," he answered, glancing round to see what effect his ancestral home had upon Miss Grace.

"Lovely!" she murmured to Mrs. Smith.

In another moment they had drawn up at the great Gothic doorway, and immediately the figure of a little child, dressed in white, appeared on the top of the broad steps, kissing her small hands in token of welcome.

"Go in directly—you'll get cold. Go in, I say," Bootles called out. It was, indeed, bitterly cold, and a few flakes of snow were falling. But Miss Mignon had a budget of news for her Bootles, and was not to be done out of telling it.

"Lal has had a letter from home," she piped out in her shrill voice. Lal was her name for Lucy, and home meant Blankhampton Barracks. "And the St. Bernard has gotted two puppies—beauties—and I'm to have one. Lal says so. And Terry has broked his leg." Terry was one of Bootles'

FERRERS' COURT.

grooms. "And Major Ally's going to be married."

Bootles was so surprised that he forgot the cold, and his orders that Miss Mignon should go in.

"*What?*" he exclaimed incredulously.

Just then Lucy himself came to the top of the steps with open arms, so to speak, and carried off Mrs. Smith into the house. Miss Mignon took advantage of the opportunity to run down the steps just as Bootles helped Madame Gourbolski to the ground.

"I welcome you with much pleasure," he said, cordially. "Miss Grace also," as he gave her his hand to jump the last step. "I am afraid you are tired. You are very white."

"I am tired," she said, in a low voice, not looking at him but the child.

"It is so bitterly cold. Don't stand a moment. Mignon, *will* you go in?"

Miss Mignon skipped up the steps, and the Russian lady caught her in her arms.

"Oh! you little angel—and what is your name?"

"I'm Miss Mignon—you're a very pretty lady" returned Mignon critically. "I wanted to go to the station, but Bootles said it was too cold, and Lal——"

"Madame does not know what Bootles and Lal mean," interrupted Bootles.

"This is Bootles and that's Lal," Miss Mignon

informed her. "I'm Miss Mignon, and I belong to Bootles."

"Oh, you belong to Bootles. I am sure he must be very proud of you," Madame answered.

"I believe I'm a great bother to him," Miss Mignon announced, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Bootles laughed. "Come to the fire, Madame," he said. Then turning to Miss Grace, "I'm sure you are very cold—you are as white as a ghost. I'm sure," addressing Lady Marion, "Aunt Marion, wine would be much better than this tea."

"No, no, tea," they cried, at least the two elder ladies, for Miss Grace seemed to have no ears for any one but the child.

"Won't you speak to me?" she asked presently, as Miss Mignon gravely regarded her with her big blue eyes.

Miss Mignon went close to her immediately.

"Did Bootles let you drive?" she asked, with interest.

Miss Grace shook her head, and lifted Miss Mignon on to her knee. "I did not ask him," she said.

"Oh!" then after a pause, "I al—ways do."

"But not a pair!"—in surprise.

Miss Mignon nodded. "When they're not too fresh. Bootles would have letted you, if you'd asked him."

"I will another time."

Lucy," said Bootles, suddenly, "is it true
at Allardyce?"

Hartog says so. They say she—er—dwrinks
e a duck."

"Pooh!" but Bootles laughed as if it was a
great joke, and Mrs. Smith begged to be enlight-
ened.

"Oh! don't you remember Allardyce? He's
the great military teetotal light."

"And—er—he wreally is an AWFUL duf-fah,"
remarked Miss Mignon, in so exact and so uncon-
scious an imitation of Lucy's drawl that her hearers
went off into fits of laughter, and Miss Grace
clasping her close to her breast, bent, and kissed
the luxuriant golden curls.

"You're crying," said Miss Mignon, promptly,
scanning Miss Grace's face with her big eyes.

"No, but you made me laugh," she said,
hastily.

"Some people do cry when they laugh," Miss
Mignon informed her. "Our Colonel does. Now
Major Garnet always chokes, and then Bootles
thumps him. I don't know what he'll do," she
added, in a tone of deep concern, "if he chokes
while we are away."

"I never saw such an original little piece of mis-
chief in my life," cried Mrs. Smith. "And how
charmingly dressed, is she not, Madame? So sen-
sible of you to cover her up with that warm serge

up to her throat and down to her wrists. Who put you up to it?"

"I fancy we evolved the idea amongst us. You see she runs in and out of my rooms, her own and Mrs. Gray's, the Adjutant's wife that is," Bootles answered. "And barrack corridors are not exactly hothouses. Besides, our doctor keeps his eye on her, and he blames the wrapping-up for her never having had a day's illness."

"I believe in it," asserted Mrs. Smith.

"And I—oh! our married ladies tell me I am quite an authority on the subject. I can tell you we get fearfully chaffed about her, Lucy and I."

"Why?" Miss Grace, asked.

"Well, because she goes about with us a good deal, and people seem to find the situation difficult to understand." He took it for granted that she knew all about Miss Mignon, and she did not press the question further. But half an hour later, when Mrs. Smith was thinking of dressing, Miss Grace tapped at her door and entered.

"Could you lend me a few black pins?" she asked. "Madame and I have both forgotten them."

"Certainly, my dear—take the box."

But Miss Grace only took a few in the pink palm of her hand.

"What a pretty child that is," she said carelessly. "Did the mother die when it was born?"

"Oh, my dear," cried Mrs. Smith. "She is not Captain Ferrers' child. No relation whatever."

"No? Whose then?"

"Ah! that is a question." Then she briefly told Miss Mignon's history, ending: "But he will never part with her now. He is so fond of her, and she adores him."

"He is a fine fellow," said Miss Grace, toying with the pins in her hand.

"A fine fellow! His is a splendid character," Mrs. Smith cried, warmly. "I assure you I have studied that man — and I have known him for years—and I *cannot* find fault in him. Years ago, when we were in great trouble, my mother and I, at the time my sister died, oh, he *was* so good, so —well," with a quick sigh, "I cannot explain it all, but he was such a comfort to us, and she died, poor darling, under very painful circumstances, especially for me. Oh, there are very few in the world like him—not one in ten thousand. Take his action as regarded that dear little child, for instance. His brother officers wanted him to send her to the workhouse, but as he wrote to me, 'Some day I may meet the mother, and how should I face her?'"

"Ah!" murmured Miss Grace, and Mrs. Smith went on.

"It was no small undertaking for a man in his position, for he has not left her to the entire care

of servants—she is continually with him and Mr. Lucy, who is also very fond of her. Do you know he pays her nurse fifty pounds a year? In fact, she is just as if she were really his own child. But it is just like him."

"And they would have sent her to the workhouse?"

"One or two of them—not Mr. Lucy, of course."

Miss Grace was silent for a few moments. Then she roused herself as from a brown study.

"Well, I am detaining you, Mrs. Smith, and shall be late myself. Thank you very much."

Then she went away, passing softly down the corridor, and entered her room, locking the door behind her. But once within that safe shelter she flung the pins on the table and dropped upon her knees, burying her face in her hands, while the scalding tears forced their way between her fingers, and the great sobs shook her frame. "'Some day he might meet the mother," she sobbed, "'and how should he face her?' Oh, my child, my little child, how shall I face him? How shall I bear it? How shall I live in the same house with him without falling on my knees and blessing him for saving my little child from—God knows what?"

CHAPTER VI.

"OH, DON'T, DON'T, DON'T!"

A MONTH had passed, and the three ladies still remained at Ferrers Court, though other visitors had come and gone, lots of them. Lucy was still there, also, and occupied in making des-

perate love to the Russian lady, utterly ignoring two important facts—one that she only laughed at him, the other that she was three years his senior.

But while all this was going on Bootles had fallen in love at last, as men and women only fall once in their lives, and of course the lady was Madame Gourbolski's friend, Miss Grace—had he but known it, the mother of Mignon.

But Bootles never suspected that for a moment. True, there was a likeness so strong as to proclaim the truth, and many a time Miss Grace wondered, when she caught sight of the child's face and her own in a glass, that all these people did not see it. Yet neither Bootles nor any one else did see it, and the game of love was played on with desperate earnestness on his side, and with equally desperate desire to prevent it on her's.

But Bootles admired shy game, and Miss Grace's evident shyness made him only the more earnest, and not being troubled with that faint heart which never won fair lady, had no intention of allowing Madame Gourbolski to depart from beneath his roof without asking Miss Grace to return to it as its mistress. Therefore one afternoon, when he returned from hunting in much bespattered pink, and went into the firelit library, where he found Miss Grace half dreaming by the fire, he shut the door with the intention of getting it over at once. Miss Grace rose with some signs of confusion.

"Don't go for a minute," said Bootles, "I want to speak to you. It seems to me that you have grown very fond of my little Mignon. Is it not so?"

Miss Grace caught at the carvings of the oaken chimney-shelf to steady herself, and her heart began to beat hard and fast.

"Yes; I am very fond of her," she stammered.

"I wish you would take her for your own," Bootles said, very gently.

"For — my own?" sharply. "What do you mean?"

For a moment she thought he knew all, but his next words undeceived her.

"If she had such a mother as you, poor little motherless waif, and if *I* had such a wife, and if Ferrers' Court had such a mistress! Oh! don't you understand what I mean?" taking her hand.

Miss Grace snatched her hand away. "Oh, don't, *don't*, DON'T," she said, turning away.

But Bootles possessed himself of it again. "Must I tell you more? Oh, my darling, how from the very first day I ever saw you I loved you with all my heart and soul? How, when I bade you welcome to my house, I could, and would if I had dared, have taken you up to my heart and kissed you before every one? How——"

"Oh, tell me nothing—nothing," she cried, with feverish haste. "Don't you understand it cannot be?—it is impossible, quite impossible!"

"Impossible," he echoed, blankly. "Why is it impossible? Not because you don't care, that I'll swear."

She said nothing.

"Or, if that is so, look at me and say I don't love you."

But Miss Grace did not speak, nor yet did she look.

"Or will you tell me that there is some one else whom you like better?" he asked, regaining hope.

No. Miss Grace did not seem inclined to vouchsafe that information either.

"Or that the care of the child would be an objection?"

"*No!*" she burst out in an agonised tone.

"Then what do you mean by impossible?" he asked. "It seems to me that it is very possible indeed."

She looked at him—that proud, handsome, erect man, with a smile of expectant happiness on his good face—and tried to take her hands away.

"Oh!" she sobbed out, "don't you think that I would if I could? I have not been so happy that I would throw away such happiness as you could give me. Some day you may know what it costs me to tell you that it is quite impossible."

"You give me no hope?" he asked, in a dull voice, and she saw that he had grown white to his very lips.

"None," she returned; then added, bitterly.

"OH, DON'T, DON'T, DON'T!"

"Oh! hope and I have had nothing to say to one another, this long, long while."

Bootles dropped her hand listlessly. "Then it is no use my boring you," he said, turning away.

A fierce denial rose to the girl's lips, but she choked it down, and suffered his words in silence. Then meekly, and with one imploring backward look at his tall figure as he stood, his head well up in spite of his defeat, before the fire, she went away and left him alone.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DECEASED WIFE'S SISTER BILL.

SO it was all over! This was the end of all his hopes and dreams and wishes! This was the end! None of his bright hopes would ever be;—none of his golden dreams would come to pass. His wishes had no weight with the woman he loved. He had looked forward—like a fool, he thought bitterly, and had pictured her in a dozen different ways: at the head of his table, in the hunting-field, in the middle age, and in the decline of life, as Mignon's mother, as his wife. But it was all over now—when Madame's visit was over, she would go from under his roof, never to come back to it any more, for ever.

He was still standing there when the door opened with some difficulty, and Miss Mignon appeared on the threshold.

"Bootles?" she said, inquiringly.

Bootles turned round to her. "Well?" he answered.

Miss Mignon heard the misery in his voice, and

ran to him. "Bootles got a headache?" she asked.

He dropped into a chair and took her in his arms. "Such a headache, Mignon."

Miss Mignon knew what Bootles' headaches were, and drew his head down upon her small shoulder with an air of protecting and comforting dignity, equally pretty and absurd in one so young.

"Mignon *loves* Bootles," she whispered.

"Will Mignon *always* love Bootles?" he asked.

"Always," was the confident reply. "Mignon will *always* love Bootles."

And so, in and because of his trouble, the little child crept closer and closer into his heart, and drove out the greatest bitterness of his disappointment, and the clasp of her little arms about his neck seemed to take away the sharpest sting of defeat. The touch of her baby lips upon his aching forehead—and it *did* ache—brought him a larger measure of comfort than any other living thing had power to do at that moment.

If only he had known that Mignon was *her* child.

But Bootles was not the man to sulk with fate; if Miss Grace would not have him, no more was to be said, and no one but Mrs. Smith saw anything unusual between them. But trust Mrs. Smith. She walked into Miss Grace's room, and taxed her with it—taxed her in so friendly a way that the girl began to cry miserably. Mrs. Smith fumed!

"It is absurd," she cried, "to refuse such a man — such a position — such — such — oh! it's absurd. I have no patience with you. You will never have such a chance again—never."

"Oh, never!" she sobbed.

"Why, then, throw it away? Let me go and tell——"

"No. Tell him nothing. I have already told him it is impossible. Oh, Mrs. Smith!" she cried, passionately. "Do you think any woman in her senses would refuse him, if she could help it? Not I, I assure you."

"It is inexplicable," said Mrs. Smith, but she protested no further.

On the next day they left Ferrers' Court, Bootles driving them to the station. But it was all very different now—very different from the last time he had driven them anywhere. There was no laughter, no joking, no promise to come again. He was not outwardly angry, not harsh nor hard in any way, but he was very polite, and politeness from him was heartbreaking.

It was soon over when they reached the station—a few minutes of that kind of conversation which people make when they are waiting for a carriage or a train, as they said the passengers of the *London* made while walking up and down quietly waiting for the end. There was a handshaking all round, the lifting of Bootles' and Lucy's hats, a fuss over Miss Mignon, and that was all. Miss Grace looking out of the carriage window, with tear-dimmed eyes, saw that they were together, the child's hand in his. Miss Mignon's last words were yet ringing in her ears. "Bootles has gotted such a headache."

"Then Mignon must be very kind to him," Miss Grace whispered.

Ay, Miss Mignon had need to be kind, fo Bootles had "gotted" such a heartache too!

Aye; there was no doubt that Bootles h "gotted" such a heart-ache, that there was no cha of his getting rid of it for many and many a

to come. But heart-ache or no heart-ache, life
to be lived just the same; long leave and freed
from the sharp wits and clever arithmetical calcu
tions, which put two and two together, almost b
fore two and two were there to be put, came to a
end, and he had to go back to his regiment and
Blankhampton Barracks, to hear the same old
jokes, to follow the same duties and pleasures, and
to try his level best to be the same old Bootles,
everybody's friend, everybody's favourite.

Nobody noticed much difference in him, though,
in truth, there was a difference. He was not s
patient as he had been aforetime—not so entirel
indifferent to the chaff hurled, not at him but a
his best friend, Lucy. It was not very long afte
his return from Ferrers' Court that a discussio
arose from this very subject, which in turn led to
story from Bootles, which afterwards became on
of the stock jokes of the regiment.

It happened thus. It was one bitterly cold
March afternoon, when half a dozen officers were
gathered together in the ante-room, over which
the dusk of the gloaming was fast stealing, with
only the firelight to dispel it. Bootles was sitting
half asleep in a big chair, when the sound of a
voice roused him from his melancholy meditations.

"Yes, he's a devilish good fellow," the voice
said; "but he's such a fool—such an awful fool,
you know."

They were at Lucy again, so Bootles cast his meditations to the winds and flung himself into the fray.

"So you always say—so everybody says," he responded coolly. "So, by Jove, does poor old Lucy himself say likewise. But all the same, it's simply a mistake. Lucy is as clever as daylight down at the bottom of all that put-on drawling foolishness of his. You fellows see no further than the expression of intense stupidity which is Lucy's habitual form. You seem to think that because he can't, or won't, use an 'R' without a 'W' in front of it, that he is not capable of seeing as far through a deal board as any other fellow. But it's just the very greatest mistake in the world. Old Lucy is not such a fool as he looks, by a long way."

"You're quite right, Bootles; he most decidedly is not," laughed another man from the depths of a huge sofa. "Lucy is no fool, far from it; but you'll admit that to be as big a fool as he looks, he would have to be a big fool indeed. By-the-bye, what was that joke at the Deanery on Sunday afternoon? You were close to him all the time, and I was 'pinned' in the inner drawing-room."

Bootles began to laugh immediately.

"Well, you know that some of the Bishop's people were at the afternoon service at the cathedral, and went into the Deanery afterwards."

"Yes," cried several voices.

"As soon as Lucy put his nose inside the room he was promptly taken possession of by the eldest Miss Jones—and as promptly tackled on the question of the 'Deceased Wife's Sister Bill.'

"'What do you think of the "Deceased Wife's Sister Bill," Mr. Lucy?' Miss Jones asked, with an engaging smile. She's awfully like the Bishop, is Miss Jones."

"Just shows her teeth in the same way," laughed Hartog. "Well, go on!"

"Well, she certainly is not handsome," Bootles admitted, "nor yet very young, but really she gave poor old Lucy such a killing look out of the corners of her eyes, that really I began to think she would hook him on the spot.

"Lucy looked up, with his head on one side, and with his most reflective air of wisdom, just as if he were a monkey blessed with an extra quantity of downright stupidity and cunning mingled, and she was a harder nut to crack than had ever crossed his path before."

"In which he wasn't very far out of it," put in Harkness, with a dry laugh, "Well, and what then?"

"He looked at her for full half a minute," Bootles went on, "and then he asked, in the most plaintive manner imaginable, 'Is it a wriddle? I nevah could guess a wriddle in all my life. I'll give it up, please.'

"'A riddle,' echoed the Bishop's daughter, scornfully, 'of course not, Mr. Lucy; it's a measure which they are trying to pass through Parliament. But they won't, the BENCH'—speaking in a great, big, capital letter style of importance—'the BENCH will never allow it.'

"Lucy looked politely interested.

"'A measure—de—ah me—you don't say so, Miss Jones! and—er—how much does it measure?'

"'Its a *Bill* they are trying to get through the House—the *Upper* House.' She began to get a little cross over it, and, by-the-bye, you fellows all know what Miss Jones is, when she's cross," in an aside.

"Yes, rather," answered a voice, amidst a general laugh.

Bootles continued his story.

"'Oh, a *Bill!*' returned Lucy, very politely, and with a great show of surprise, 'I—er—thought you said it was a measure! And how much—er—is the bill for, Miss Jones?'

"Miss Jones uttered an exclamation of impatience and despair, 'Its an ACT!'—she fairly hurled the word at him, but Lucy's serenity remained absolutely unruffled.

"'Oh, wreally,' he echoed, 'An Act, is it? and does Nelly Farwren play in it?'"

A roar of laughter greeted this and when it had subsided Bootles continued his story—

dead woman myself,' he explained. 'I'd wrather have one al—ive—I must say.'

"'But it would be the poor wife who would be dead!' cried Miss Jones, exasperated almost beyond endurance.

"'The poor *husband*, I think,' corrected Lucy, very softly.

"'But you would marry the sister.'

"'I'll give it up, please,' said Lucy, looking wiser than ever.

"'You would marry the sister,' she repeated impatiently.

"'I'll give it up, please,' he said again.

"'Your wife,' she began, 'would——'

"'But I haven't a wife,' he interrupted. 'I nev—ah marwried *any* body in all my life. I give you my word of honour.'

"'But do you think a man ought to marry two sisters? Not you, in particular, but *any* man!' Miss Jones cried, determined at any cost of time and patience to make him understand her.

"'Why not?' enquired Lucy, innocently.

"'Do you think there is any permission given for it in the Old Testament?'

"Lucy looked awfully wise.

"'There was Jacob?' he ventured, mildly.

"'Jacob,' said Miss Jones, crossly; 'Jacob, Mr. Lucy.'

"'Yes, Jacob! Didn't he—er—marwry two

sisters? Didn't even wait till the first one was dead either. Now, don't you think, Miss Jones, it must have been a gwreat deal wrougher on the first wife, who was vewry plain and—er—tender-eyed, to have her comely young sister set over her head, in the place of favouritism, if not of honour, than it would have been if Leah had died first and had known nothing at all about it?'

"'Oh, Jacob!' sniffed Miss Jones, with unutterable scorn; 'I don't think we can quite take *Jacob* for a pattern, Mr. Lucy.'

"'No?' Old Lucy was sugar and honey in human guise. 'But—er—wasn't he one of the—ah—Fathers of Iswrael? I always thought so.'

"Miss Jones suddenly veered round and changed her tactics. 'I—er—think, Mr. Lucy,' she remarked severely, 'that it is more a question affecting the family life of to-day even than the authority given by the Mosaic law. Now, if your wife——'

"'But I haven't one—never had such a thing,' Lucy explained, then suddenly resumed his most confidential air of utter foolishness.—'The fact is, Miss Jones,' he said, 'I nev—ah—wanted to marwry but one lady in all my life, and *she* jilt—ed me. Her name was Naomi——'"

"No!" cried three or four incredulous voices, from different parts of the room, "you don't mean to say he dragged all that in again?"

"Every word of it; the Wrevewrend Solomon

—er—Fligg and all the little Fliggs. Yes, he let Miss Jones have it all, to the bitter end. And you call that fellow a fool?" the soldier wound up reproachfully.

"I know I blessed old Lucy from the very bottom of my heart," Stewart cried. "I never saw Miss Jones so thoroughly tired out before. It was fine."

"Yes, of course, it was fine," Preston admitted, with a laugh; "but then Lucy always *is* fine; he's such a fool."

Bootles looked up with a contemptuous expression on his good-looking and usually impassive face. "It seems to me," he said, quietly, "that if Lucy is a fool, there never was a fool who suffered less from other people's fooling. There is not one of you who has not at some time or other been taken in by him; but when did any of you ever take Lucy in, ever so little?"

There was a profound silence throughout the fire-lit ante-room, for nobody could say a word. Bootles laughed his short, amused laugh, as he left it, and when the door was closed behind him, the silence was ended.

"I don't know," said Hartog, "whether any of you fellows have noticed it, but, in my opinion, Bootles has changed very much of late. Faith! He seems to take the most harmless joke as gospel now, and comes down like a sledge-hammer on a

single word of chaff. All the same, he's perfectly right about Lucy. Lucy would turn me inside out for brains in two minutes."

"But that don't say much for Lucy's, Tony," cried Harkness, amid a roar of laughter.

"Miss Mignon is very much obliged," quoted Tony.

CHAPTER VIII.

"HE IS MIGNON'S FATHER."

A CROWD of roughs, a lesser crowd of third-rate spectators, and a lesser gathering of fashionable ones were assembled on the Blankhampton racecourse, for it was the day of the Scarlet Lancers Steeplechases.

On the Grand Stand were to be seen most of the rank and fashion of the neighbourhood, and a goodly show of that class of people who are always to be found about towns which are also military stations,—the class of people who have daughters to marry, and not much money to marry them with.

There were all the Scarlet Lancer ladies in full force, from the Colonel's wife in blue velvet and sables, to the Quartermaster's lady in a hard felt hat, with long diamond and pearl earrings. There were officers in cords and boots, their silken finery hidden by Newmarket coats. And there was the bride, Mrs. Allardyce, in pink and grey, the Major's racing colours—oh, lor! as the fellows said, when they saw her. And there was Miss Mignon,

a little three-year-old belle got up in Bootles' colours scarlet, purple, and gold—adapted in her small case to a warm frock of purple velvet, braided with scarlet and gold, and on her golden curls a jockey-cap to match it. Utterly absurd, most people said, but Bootles didn't seem to see it. Nor, for the matter of that, did Miss Mignon herself. Held by Bootles,

or, when Bootles was riding, by Lucy, she sat on the broad ledge of the balcony and surveyed the world, like a queen in miniature.

It was a fine place for seeing; yes, and a fine place for hearing too, as Lucy testified afterwards in his own peculiar style of delivery.

"Er—I and Miss Mignon were waiting for Bootles to come down the lawn, when—er—a lady next to us—er—a little unpwrepossessing person—I found out afterwards that her name is Berwry—with a nose like a teapot spout, and a mouth of the bulldog ordah—little daughter, by-the-bye, pretty much of the same type, but just a shade less hideous—suddenly electwrified us by pulling out a huge pair of gold eyeglasses, and holding the wrace-card at arm's length.

"'Ow!' said she, in a mincing voice, when Miles came down the lane looking like a sack of flour in a purple satin jacket, 'Ow! CAP-tain Fer-wrahs. Ow! Dorothy, my deah, CAP-tain Fer-wrahs! *Vewry* handsome—and how *beau*-tifully he wrides. Ow! I'm shaw he'll win, and what a *lovely* horse. CAP-tain Fer-wrahs! He's vewry handsome.'

"Well—er—I gave Miss Mignon a gwreat squeeze to hold her tongue—and she did! This Mrs.—er—Berwry went on expatiating on Miles's great beauty of person, and on the absolute certainty of his winning. 'And his pet name is Bootles,' she informed us. His *pet* name! Well, pwresently, Bootles came sailing down the lawn in all his glowry, and Miss Mignon quite forgot the old girl, and shouted out to him. 'Bootles,' she called, 'Bootles.'

"Bootles glanced up, and waved his hand, and

—er—the old party called Berwry turned wroun and eyed her sharply, saw the scarlet, purple, an gold of her dwress, looked at her card, and sa witheringly 'Ow! I don't know *him*,' as if the were a dozen Captain Ferwrahs knocking abou and this was one of the eleven she didn't know.

"Well, when the wrace was over—er—who should come up but Miles.

"'Ah, Miles,' said I, 'I—er—heard a laday expatiating just now on your extwreme beauty and gwrace and elegance of person—was shaw you'd win! What a pity you didn't.'

"'Bless my soul,' said Miles. 'Was she pwretty?'

"'Oh, don't be flattered—she took you for Bootles,' said I, ignoring the question.

"'Bootles' money again!' cwried Miles, with a gwreat wroar of laughter.

"Well, in two twos up comes Bootles. 'See me win, Mignon?' said he.

"So I—er—told him the stowry too, and Bootles laughed that absurd 'Ha ha', of his. 'Come along and have some lunch, Mignon, my sweetheart,' said he, '*and let's be out of this!*'"

But it was after this incident that the most important event of that bright May day occurred—one of those fearful struggles to win, when half-a-dozen horses show well for the post, and all the field finds tongue and shouts its hardest.

"Ferrers wins! Blue and fawn! Yellow and black! Miles wins—Miles wins! No, no, Ferrers in front—fawn and blue! Hartog—Hartog—Hartog wins! Miles front! Ah, he's down! Ferrers—Miles—blue and fawn—Gilchrist gains—Miles—Gilchrist—Ferrers wins—Ferrers wins! All up with the others! Ferrers WINS!"

And then the company, good, bad, and indifferent had time to remember that a man was down. No, not one man, but two. To find out that Hartog was bruised and stunned, but able with help to get to the dressing-room and recover himself, to learn that the swarming crowd round the other was watching a more exciting race than that which they had just witnessed with shouts and applause—that they were watching with awe and in silence a race between life and death; for Gilchrist, the "odd" man of the regiment, the man who had been nobody's friend, nobody's chum, was lying in the midst of them, with his back broken, waiting for a hurdle.

They were all as sorry as men could be who had never been moved by feelings of friendship. The proceedings were stopped at once, and they went gravely back to barracks, those who had ridden to get into morning clothes, and all of them to hang about waiting for news.

But there was no hope—absolutely none for him whatever. With all his faults, failings, and pecu-

liarities, Gavor Gilchrist was passing away from their midst, by exchange, as Hartog had once wished, though the exchange, not of one regiment for another, but of this world for the next.

It was about six o'clock that the senior of the two surgeons in attendance on Gilchrist entered the ante-room, and, looking round, beckoned for Bootles.

"What news?" asked several voices.

"He won't last the night. Bootles, he wants you."

"I'll come," said Bootles, rising.

"Sure to want Bootles," observed Preston.

"Oh, yes, I should myself," returned another.

"Won't last the night," remarked a third. "Well, I never did like Gilchrist, never, but all the same, I'm deuced sorry for him now, poor chap. For oh, by Jove! it's a fearful thing when you come to that."

And then they fell into silence again, waiting for Bootles to come back. Half-an-hour passed—three-quarters—and Bootles did not come. An hour—then Bootles appeared—came with a white face, and a scared look in his blue eyes, followed by the doctor who had fetched him. Every man in the room was roused from a lounging attitude to one of expectation and surprise.

"Bootles," said Lucy, moving towards him.

But Bootles did not even look at him. He turned


VR

to the doctor, and uttered words the like of which none of his hearers had ever heard from him before

"I kept my temper, Doctor—you think I did? I know the man's dying. Yes, I know, and I shouldn't like to think I lost my temper with a poor chap who was dying, but—but—no I won't say a word. I'll go away and keep to myself, until I've got over it a little. If I stop here I shall say something I shall be sorry for all the rest of my life."

"What is it, Bootles?" broke in Lucy, in his soft voice.

But Bootles did not reply for a moment. He stood still, trying hard to control himself, but Lucy, who had laid his hand upon his sleeve, felt that he was shaking from head to foot, and his very lips were trembling.

"Tell us," said Lucy persuasively. "What is it?"

"He is Mignon's father," Bootles answered. And then he broke from Lucy's grasp and fled.

"Impossible!" Lucy cried.

"Not at all—it is true," the Doctor answered. "He is making his will now, leaving Bootles sole guardian and trustee to the child."

"The brute," burst out Preston indignantly, remembering Gilchrist's words—not so long ago.

"Hush, hush! The man is dying, and death alters everything," the Doctor cried.

"And Bootles kept his temper? Said nothing?"

"Not one word—of reproach."

"Has he seen her?"

"No. He would not, though Bootles asked him."

"His own child—and she Miss Mignon!"

"All the better. She cannot endure him."

"By Jove! But what a blow for Bootles!"

"How will he take it? Will it make any difference?"

"As wregards Miss Mignon? What wrot you talk. As if Bootles——," but there Lucy broke off in disgust, and the Babel of surmises, questions, and answers went on.

And that night Gavor Gilchrist died!

CHAPTER IX.

"SOME DAY I MAY MEET THE MOTHER."

OH! but it was a blow for Bootles! To find he had been duped, tricked, made a fool of all this time; to remember the anxiety, the trouble, the expense to which he had been put, nay, to recall the chaff he had endured, and then to discover that Miss Mignon was Gilchrist's child, the child of the man whom he went perhaps nearer to hating than anyone he had ever known in all his life! Everything came back to him then—the dead man's jibes, and sneers, and taunts, his unwearied efforts to tax him with an offence which he knew that he had not committed. And, though he had failed in that, oh! what a fool Gilchrist had made of him! That was the sting Bootles felt most of anything.

For hours after he left the anteroom Bootles kept out of everyone's way, indeed until Lucy came to tell him that Gilchrist was dead. Then, it being close upon the hour of eleven, he went and knocked at the door of Mignon's nursery. The

nurse opened it a few inches, and seeing who it was, set it open wide.

"Is Miss Mignon asleep?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; hours ago," the woman answered.

He passed into the inner room where the child was lying. A candle burnt on a table beside the cot, casting its light on the fair baby face, now flushed in sleep, and on the tangled golden curls.

Both her arms lay outside the eider coverlet, one hand grasping the whip with which he had ridden, *and won*, that day, the other held the card of the races. Bootles bent and scanned her face closely, but not one trace could he discern of likeness to the father, not one, and he drew a deep breath of relief that it was so.

Well he remembered Lucy's puzzled scrutiny of the year-old baby. "There's a likeness, but I don't know where to plant it." If there had been a likeness to Gilchrist then it had now passed away, and as Bootles satisfied himself that it was so, his love for her, which during the last few hours had hung trembling in the balance, though he would hardly have acknowledged it, even to himself, re-asserted itself, and rose up in his heart stronger than ever. Just then she moved uneasily in her sleep.

"Lal, where *is* Bootles?" she asked. Then, after a pause, "Gotted *another* headache?" and an instant later, "Miss Grace said Mignon was to be *very* kind to Bootles."

Bootles bent down and kissed her, and she awoke.

"Bootles," she said, in sleepy surprise; then imperatively, "Take me up."

So Bootles carried her to the fire in the adjoining room, where the nurse was sewing a fresh frill of lace in the pretty velvet frock with its braidings of scarlet and gold, which she had worn that day.

"Lal said Mignon wasn't to go to Bootles," she said, reproachfully.

"Bootles has been bothered, Mignon," he answered.

"Poor Bootles," stroking his cheek with her soft hand. "Bootles was vexed, Lal said so. But not with Mignon. Mignon told Lal so," confidently.

"Never with Mignon," answered Bootles, resting his cheek against the tossed golden curls, and feeling as if he had done this faithful baby heart a cruel injustice by his hours of anger and doubt.

There was a moment of silence, broke by the nurse. "Have you heard, sir, how Mr. Gilchrist is?" she asked.

Bootles roused himself. "He is dead, Nurse. Died half an hour ago."

"Then, if you please, sir," she asked hesitatingly, "might I ask if it is true, about Miss Mignon?"

"Yes, it is true," his face darkening.

"Because, sir, Miss Mignon should have mourning," she began, when Bootles cut her short.

"I shall not allow her to wear mourning for Mr. Gilchrist," he said curtly, so the nurse dared say no more.

Three days later the funeral took place, and if the facts of the dead man's having acknowledged Miss Mignon as his child, and having admitted to Bootles that he had transferred her that night from

his own quarters to Bootles' rooms, created a sensation, it was as nothing to the intense surprise caused by the will, which was read, by the dead man's desire, before all the officers of the regiment.

In it he left his entire property to his daughter, Mary Gilchrist, now in the care of Captain Ferrers, and commonly known as Mignon, on condition that Captain Ferrers consented to be her sole guardian and trustee until she had attained the age of twenty-one, or until her marriage, provided it should be with her guardian's sanction, and on the express understanding that Captain Ferrers should not give up the care of the child to her mother, even temporarily. To his wife, Helen Gilchrist, a copy of this testament was to be sent forthwith. Should any of the conditions be violated, the whole property of which he died possessed should go to his cousin, Lucian Gavor Gilchrist; but if the conditions be faithfully observed Captain Ferrers should have the power of applying any, or all, of the income arising from the estate for the use and maintenance of the said Mary Gilchrist.

"Cwrazy," murmured Lucy to Bootles, who listened in contemptuous silence, and wondered in no small dismay what kind of a life he should have if Mignon's mother chose to make herself objectionable.

But the will was not crazy at all, far from it. It was only a very cleverly thought-out plan for keep-

ing mother and child apart. Bootles would take care not to endanger Mignon's inheritance, and Gilchrist had taken advantage of it to carry out his animosity towards his wife to the bitter end.

But, of course, there was one contingency he had never thought of or provided for—*marriage*.

It was less than a week after Gilchrist's death that Bootles received a note by hand, signed Helen Gilchrist.

"Already!" he groaned, impatiently.

"May I trouble you to send the child to see me for half-an-hour during this afternoon?" she said—and that was all.

But Bootles did not see *sending* the child to be quietly stolen away. He forgot quite, that since Gilchrist had not left his widow a farthing, she would probably be now no better able to provide for the child than she had been when compelled to cast her baby upon the father's mercy. Therefore, immediately after lunch, he drove down to the hotel from which the note had been written. Yes; Mrs. Gilchrist was within—this way. And then—then—Bootles, with the child fast hold of his hand, was shown into a room—and there they found—*Miss Grace*.

The truth flashed into his mind instantly! She rose hurriedly, and he saw that she was clad in black, but was not in widow's dress. She fell upon her knees, and almost smothered Mignon with kisses.

"MIGNON, MIGNON!" SHE CRIED.

"Mignon—Mignon," she cried.

"Mignon has been very kind to Bootles." Mignon explained—not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

"My Mignon—my baby!" the mother sobbed. Bootles watched them—the two things he loved best on earth.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" he asked at last.

"What shall I say?" she had risen from her knees, and now moved shyly away.

"You might say," said Bootles, severely, "that you are very sorry that you—a married woman—deceived me and stole my heart away. You might say that for one thing."

"But I am not sorry," cried Mignon's mother, audaciously.

"Then you might take a leaf out of Mignon's book, and say, as she says when I have a headache, "Mignon *loves* Bootles."

* * * * *

"I wreally do think," remarked Lucy to the fellows, when the astounding news had been told and freely discussed, "that now we must let that poor, malicious, cwrooked-minded chap wrest in his gwrave in peace. Seems to me," he continued with his most reflective air; "that—er—Solomon was wright, and said a vewry wise thing when he said, 'Love laughs at locksmiths.'"

"Solomon!" cried a voice, amid a shout of laughter.

"Oh, wasn't it Solomon?" questioned Lucy mildly. "It's of no consequence; some one said it. But only think of that poor devil spending his last moments wraising a barwrier to keep mother and child apart; and old Bootles fulfills all the conditions to the letter, and bwreaks them all in the spirit by—marwriage."

THE END

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